

Tradition and Transience

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Katie Burk

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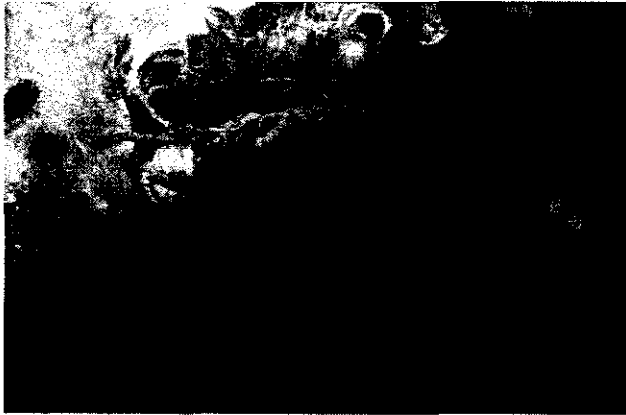
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Marilynn Derwenskus".

Ball State University

Muncie, IN

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**Katie Burk** *Green grows, then goes*, 2002, encaustic, 22" X 30"



**Marilynn Derwenskus** *The Emperor's Clothes*, 2002, egg tempera, 30" X 40"

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Abstract:

This body of work represents an investigation of technique and aesthetic in encaustic wax. It is also an exploration of images that convey ideas about the human condition and the life cycle. This group of work consists of six encaustic wax paintings, two watercolors, and a lithograph print.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Honors College, Vermont Studio Center, and the Creative Arts Program for help in funding this project. I would also like to thank Marilyn Derwenskus for providing me with this unique opportunity to attend Vermont Studio Center and to work on this fellowship project, in addition to her valuable artistic insight. I owe many thanks to my family and Jon for their support and encouragement.

### Artist Statement

A seed falls into welcoming soil as a wounded animal fights for its last breath. A child grows six inches in one year, as river sediment becomes rock in layers. An architectural relic crumbles, as an infant bird breaks free from its shell...

These events represent the life cycle: birth, development, maturity, deterioration, and death. With this body of work, I experimented with imagery that would convey the various stages of life. I sought to explore the universal application of the life cycle to rocks, architecture, and plants as well as animals and humans. I am intrigued by the idea that every entity has a finite existence and that as one is fading, another is becoming. I am also interested in how these images can communicate contrasting qualities of the human condition such as strength and fragility, resilience and mortality.

### Exploring Metaphors

As mentioned, I hoped to use images in my paintings that are visual metaphors connected to the human condition and life cycle. As I investigated the possibilities of image choice, I searched for images that would read on several levels and that would not be overtly associated with a stage of life. For example, *Green grows, then goes* develops ideas related to adolescence. This painting includes tadpoles at various stages of development and one frog. Although many organisms go through an adolescent period, the frog, as a species, experiences some of the most dramatic physical changes. In my view, adolescence is a transient stage of life, when changes are dramatic and in quick

succession. I felt that the frog-tadpole metaphor was an appropriate choice for these ideas but was not limited to these associations only.

Some of the metaphors I chose to impart were derived from personal experience and images. For example, in the piece *Natal Verve* I am dealing with ideas about renewal and birth. A part of the composition is an abstraction of an image of my mother, who is the receptacle of my own beginnings.

Another image derived from personal experience was a plant I kept in my bedroom for several months. This bamboo-like plant form can be found in *A stitch in time* and *This too shall pass (as will it all)*. The plant became something that I nurtured; I watched it grow and thrive, but I also watched it wither and die. This particular plant grew in distinct segments: each segment revealed its age and documented specific states of its existence. Reflecting upon my experiences with the plant, I realized that it had the potential to convey a range of ideas: growth, decay, fertility, history, and death.

On several occasions, I integrated microscopic cells from various body tissues. Part of my intention was to reveal that the life cycle occurs in micro and macrocosmic proportions. The choices I made in cell images were from tissues or organs that were appropriate to the piece. For example, *Rigid Resilience* includes microscopic views of bone tissue. Bones can represent old age and death. However, they can also be considered a relic and can suggest continued existence in a new form.

Through the use of these visual metaphors, I hope to expand perceptions and ideas regarding the stages of life; to reveal that every living and non-living entity goes through these stages and can possess qualities of the human condition.

### Materials, Technique and Process

Encaustic is a wax-based pigment that was used in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt in murals and funerary portraits. Encaustic is a Greek word that means, “to paint with heat.” When heated, the encaustic will become malleable; it can blend with other colors beside it and below the surface. Through the use of a heating element and brushes, the surface created in the encaustic can be smooth or textured. Since the wax cools very quickly, textural qualities like bumps and ridges in the paint surface are easily achieved. Encaustic is best when applied to a two-dimensional surface such as masonite or a wood panel.

I feel that the history and identity of the encaustic medium correspond to the ideas I hoped to convey in my paintings. Although the cultures and people who produced the first encaustic paintings reside in ancient history, the encaustic portraits have endured. Similarly, this group of work is concerned with these dichotomous states of being, such as mortality and resilience. One piece in particular that deals with these dualities is *Rigid resilience*, which juxtaposes an elderly woman with a disintegrating Greek temple. Furthermore, this piece speaks about the finite existence of all entities.

The physical qualities of the encaustic wax enhance ideas related to decay and rebirth. Most encaustic pigments are opaque and layers of wax will accumulate quickly to form a dimensional surface. This emulates the process of sedimentation where new materials are formed and a history of layers is documented. However, when a significant amount of heat is applied, layers beneath the surface can be conjured. The surface of encaustic can also be “eroded” through cutting away layers of wax or incising line. The visual result can be an aged or antiqued affect for the image or surface, as if time has

affected the art object itself. Furthermore, a history of the painting process is revealed and elements of the past are excavated.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this body of work has helped me clarify ideas regarding the human condition and the life cycle. As humans, we are capable of enduring and even defying the forces of nature to an extent; yet, we are ultimately mortal and fragile beings. Existing occurs with dualities: in nature, everything must pass and yet there is reproduction and rebirth. These paintings have allowed me to investigate the beauty that lies within each stage of life—to appreciate life's fragility as well as its resilience.



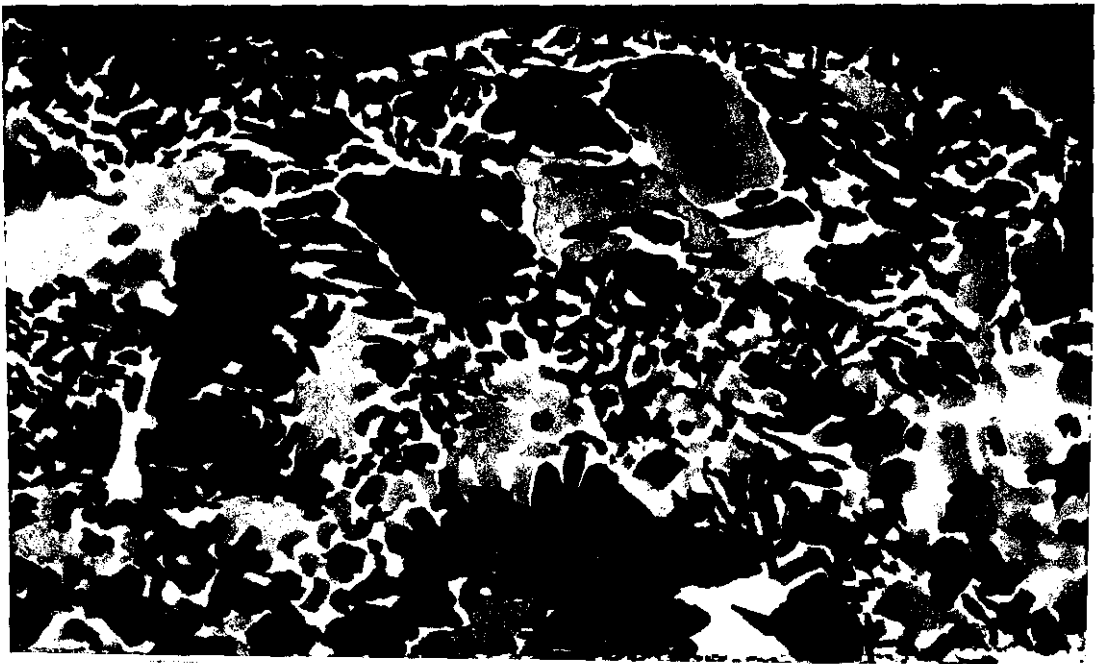
### Work Cited

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Vermont cliff, looking up

watercolor, 2002



Gihon River

watercolor, 2002



This too shall pass (as will it all)

encaustic, 2002



A stitch in time

encaustic, 2002



Green grows, then goes

encaustic, 2002



Rigid Resilience

encaustic and oil, 2002



But don't tell anyone...

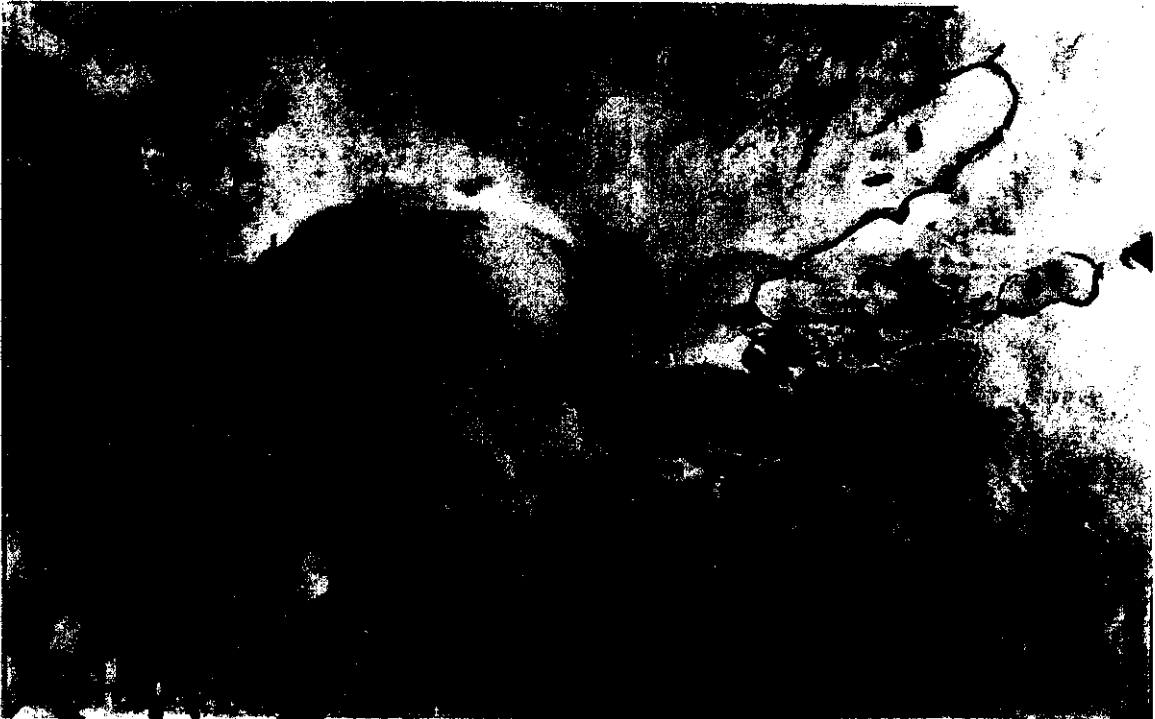
lithograph, 2002





Natal Verve

encaustic and oil, 2002



Time to harvest

encaustic, 2002